



**Testimony of**

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**Regarding**

**SB 878 – AN ACT CONCERNING THE PREVENTION ROLE  
OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

**Joint Select Committee on Children Hearing  
February 19, 2009**

Senator Musto, Representative Urban – thank you for this opportunity to address this committee on behalf of the 22,000 Connecticut supporters of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). **I am here in support of SB 878, An Act Concerning the Prevention Role of the Department of Children and Families.**

Recently, Rep. Urban chaired a task force examining the circle of violence – that is, the tendency of violence to have continuous repercussions throughout a household and to repeat itself through generations. In particular, the task force made clear that the Department of Children and Families must do more to acknowledge its role in stemming the circle of violence, in particular by recognizing the link between animal cruelty, child abuse, and adult violence.

As was noted at the ceremony to announce the task force, the Connecticut School for Ethical Education has observed that Connecticut public schools are only minimally exposing students to character or ethics training. And yet we know, for example, that:

- those who engage in animal cruelty are more likely to engage in other forms of antisocial behavior, including violence toward people;
- those exposed to an abusive family environment – where, in general, animals are also abused – are more likely to be violent; and
- greater empathy training in childhood can change these equations.

On the back end, statistics reflecting the lack of enforcement of Connecticut's animal cruelty and animal fighting laws raise concerns that sufficient deterrents to animal abuse may not exist. (*For example, in 2005, there were zero prosecutions for animal fighting under section 53-247(c) of the Connecticut General Statutes.*) Even in those cases resulting in conviction, a Connecticut law authorizing counseling for abusers is rarely invoked.

So it is imperative that the Department of Children and Families assume a leadership position in stemming violence on the front end – that is, preventing violence toward children and by children – thereby reducing the need for application of the criminal laws when these children become adults. And to do this – as was made clear during the Circle of Violence hearings – the Department of Children and Families must pay significantly greater attention to both children and animals in at-risk households. Are there signs of animal abuse? Are the children themselves harming animals? If the answer to either question is yes, it is statistically likely that children in the household are being abused and/or the children themselves will subsequently engage in other antisocial behavior, including violence toward people.

But as bleak as the situation where no such connection is made between the respective fates of children and animals in a household – despite how much we now know about the nexus between animal cruelty and other forms of violence – there is hope where such connection is made. I will not easily forget the testimony of Soul Friends' founder Kate Nicoll, whose therapeutic intervention – using animal-assisted therapy – on behalf of a Connecticut foster child abusing his foster mother's cats wholly reversed this boy's plummeting fortunes. Although Department of Children and Families had previously sought psychological help for this child, this was wasted

expense as no one had recognized the terrible significance of the boy's violent relationship with his biological family's dog. In fact, the boy was described to Kate as an "animal lover" and, indeed, had been placed in a foster home with animals because of this. Kate, however, understood that while the boy may have loved this dog, the violence he witnessed in his home had crippled his own ability to express affection without violence. With the aid of a therapy dog, Kate sought to reverse the boy's damaged understanding of love, thereby enabling the boy to express affection appropriately with his foster mother's cats and also to remain in his foster home. Further, by addressing this boy's relationship with animals, Kate ensured that this boy did not merely become a casualty of the system and instead had the opportunity to develop the emotional skills necessary to be a healthy adult and productive member of society. It is frightening to contemplate this boy's future in the absence of Kate's intervention.

Thus, we must resist all impulses to compartmentalize the welfare of animals and people as our fates are inextricably tied. As in the case of this foster child, animals are so often the proverbial "canary in the coal mine," their abuse by adults in a household, or by the children themselves, a clear marker for much-needed intervention. Certainly, it is by now common knowledge that many violent offenders – infamous killers like the Columbine shooters and every known serial killer – initiated their "careers" by abusing animals. It is therefore imperative that the Department of Child and Families make the welfare of both children and animals a priority.

Some obvious ways to accomplish this: (1) mandatory "cross-reporting" of suspected cases of child abuse and animal abuse by law enforcement and social workers, respectively (already enacted in Massachusetts, for example), (2) upon intake, mandatory screening for animal abuse, either by adults or by children, and (3) mandatory psychological counseling for children who have witnessed or engaged in animal abuse.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to provide my insights on this important social issue. I hope that you will support SB 878, and that this represents just the beginning of a long and fruitful discussion.